Fiction

One Minus One

By

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Jeff Barnett-Winsby (2006)

The moon hangs low over Texas. The moon is my mother. She is full tonight, and brighter than the brightest neon; there are folds of red in her vast amber. Maybe she is a harvest moon, a Comanche moon, I do not know. I have never seen a moon so low and so full of her own deep brightness. My mother is six years dead tonight, and Ireland is six hours away and you are asleep.

I am walking. No one else is walking. It is hard to cross Guadalupe; the cars come fast. In the Community Whole Food Store, where all are welcome, the girl at the checkout asks me if I would like to join the store's club. If I pay seventy dollars, my membership, she says, will never expire, and I will get a seven-per-cent discount on all purchases.

Six years. Six hours. Seventy dollars. Seven per cent. I tell her I am here for a few months only, and she smiles and says that I am welcome. I smile back. I can still smile. If I called you now, it would be half two in the morning; you could easily be awake.

If I called, I could go over everything that happened six years ago. Because that is what is on my mind tonight, as though no time had elapsed, as though the strength of the moonlight had by some fierce magic chosen tonight to carry me back to the last real thing that happened to me. On the phone to you across the Atlantic, I could go over the days surrounding my mother's funeral. I could go over all the details as though I were in danger of forgetting them. I could remind

you, for example, that you wore a white shirt at the funeral. It must have been warm enough not to wear a jacket. I remember that I could see you when I spoke about her from the altar, that you were over in the side aisle, on the left. I remember that you, or someone, said that you had parked your car almost in front of the cathedral because you had come late from Dublin and could not find parking anywhere else. I know that you moved your car before the hearse came after Mass to take my mother's coffin to the graveyard, with all of us walking behind. You came to the hotel once she was in the ground, and you stayed for a meal with me and Suzie, my sister. Joe, her husband, must have been near, and Cathal, my brother, but I don't remember what they did when the meal was over and the crowd had dispersed. I know that as the meal came to an end a friend of my mother's, who noticed everything, came over and looked at you and whispered to me that it was nice that my friend had come. She used the word "friend" with a sweet, insinuating emphasis. I did not tell her that what she had noticed was no longer there, was part of the past. I simply said, yes, it was nice that you had come.

You know that you are the only person who shakes his head in exasperation when I insist on making jokes and small talk, when I refuse to be direct. No one else has ever minded this as you do. You are alone in wanting me always to say something that is true. I know now, as I walk toward the house I have rented here, that if I called and told you

that the bitter past has come back to me tonight in these alien streets with a force that feels like violence, you would say that you are not surprised. You would wonder only why it has taken six years.

I was living in New York then, the city about to enter its last year of innocence. I had a new apartment there, just as I had a new apartment everywhere I went. It was on Ninetieth and Columbus. You never saw it. It was a mistake. I think it was a mistake. I didn't stay there long—six or seven months—but it was the longest I stayed anywhere in those years or the years that followed. The apartment needed to be furnished, and I spent two or three days taking pleasure in the sharp bite of buying things: two easy chairs that I later sent back to Ireland; a leather sofa from Bloomingdale's, which I eventually gave to one of my students; a big bed from 1-800-Mattres; a table and some chairs from a place downtown; a cheap desk from the thrift shop.

And all those days—a Friday, a Saturday, and a Sunday, at the beginning of September—as I was busy with delivery times, credit cards, and the whiz of taxis from store to store, my mother was dying and no one could find me. I had no cell phone, and the phone line in the apartment had not been connected. I used the pay phone on the corner if I needed to make calls. I gave the delivery companies a friend's phone number, in case they had to let me know when they would come with my furniture. I phoned my friend a few times a day, and she came shopping with me

sometimes and she was fun and I enjoyed those days. The days when no one in Ireland could find me to tell me that my mother was dying.

Eventually, late on the Sunday night, I slipped into a Kinko's and went online and found that Suzie had left me message after message, starting three days before, marked "Urgent" or "Are you there" or "Please reply" or "Please acknowledge receipt" and then just "Please!!!" I read one of them, and I replied to say that I would call as soon as I could find a phone, and then I read the rest of them one by one. My mother was in the hospital. She might have to have an operation. Suzie wanted to talk to me. She was staying at my mother's house. There was nothing more in any of them, the urgency being not so much in their tone as in their frequency and the different titles she gave to each e-mail that she sent.

I woke her in the night in Ireland. I imagined her standing in the hall at the bottom of the stairs. I would love to say that Suzie told me my mother was asking for me, but she said nothing like that. She spoke instead about the medical details and how she herself had been told the news that our mother was in the hospital and how she had despaired of ever finding me. I told her that I would call again in the morning, and she said that she would know more then. My mother was not in pain now, she said, although she had been. I did not tell her that my classes would begin in three days, because I did not need to. That night, it

sounded as though she wanted just to talk to me, to tell me. Nothing more.

But in the morning when I called I realized that she had put quick thought into it as soon as she heard my voice on the phone, that she had known I could not make arrangements to leave for Dublin late on a Sunday night, that there would be no flights until the next evening; she had decided to say nothing until the morning. She had wanted me to have an easy night's sleep. And I did, and in the morning when I phoned she said simply that there would come a moment very soon when the family would have to decide. She spoke about *the family* as though it were as distant as the urban district council or the government or the United Nations, but she knew and I knew that there were just the three of us. We were the family, and there is only one thing that a family is ever asked to decide in a hospital. I told her that I would come home; I would get the next flight. I would not be in my new apartment for some of the furniture deliverers, and I would not be at the university for my first classes. Instead, I would find a flight to Dublin, and I would see her as soon as I could. My friend phoned Aer Lingus and discovered that a few seats were kept free for eventualities like this. I could fly out that evening.

You know that I do not believe in God. I do not care much about the mysteries of the universe, unless they come to me in words, or in music

maybe, or in a set of colors, and then I entertain them merely for their beauty and only briefly. I do not even believe in Ireland. But you know, too, that in these years of being away there are times when Ireland comes to me in a sudden guise, when I see a hint of something familiar that I want and need. I see someone coming toward me, with a soft way of smiling, or a stubborn uneasy face, or a way of moving warily through a public place, or a raw, almost resentful stare into the middle distance. In any case, I went to J.F.K. that evening, and I saw them as soon as I got out of the taxi: a middle-aged couple pushing a trolley that had too much luggage on it, the man looking fearful and mild, as though he might be questioned by someone at any moment and not know how to defend himself, and the woman harassed and weary, her clothes too colorful, her heels too high, her mouth set in pure, blind determination, but her eyes humbly watchful, undefiant.

I could easily have spoken to them and told them why I was going home and they both would have stopped and asked me where I was from, and they would have nodded with understanding when I spoke. Even the young men in the queue to check in, going home for a quick respite—just looking at their tentative stance and standing in their company saying nothing, that brought ease with it. I could breathe for a while without worry, without having to think. I, too, could look like them, as though I owned nothing, or nothing much, and were ready to

smile softly or keep my distance without any arrogance if someone said, “Excuse me,” or if an official approached.

When I picked up my ticket, and went to the check-in desk, I was told to go to the other desk, which looked after business class. It occurred to me, as I took my bag over, that it might be airline policy to comfort those who were going home for reasons such as mine with an upgrade, to cosset them through the night with quiet sympathy and an extra blanket or something. But when I got to the desk I knew why I had been sent there, and I wondered about God and Ireland, because the woman at the desk had seen my name being added to the list and had told the others that she knew me and would like to help me now that I needed help.

Her name was Frances Carey, and she had lived next door to my aunt’s house, where we—myself and Cathal—were left when my father got sick. I was eight years old then. Frances must have been ten years older, but I remember her well, as I do her sister and her two brothers, one of whom was close to me in age. Their family owned the house that my aunt lived in, the aunt who took us in. They were grander than she was and much richer, but she had become friendly with them, and there was, since the houses shared a large back garden and some outhouses, a lot of traffic between the two establishments.

Cathal was four then, but in his mind he was older. He was learning to read already, he was clever and had a prodigious memory, and was treated as a young boy in our house rather than as a baby; he could decide which clothes to wear each day and what television he wanted to watch and which room he would sit in and what food he would eat. When his friends called at the house, he could freely ask them in, or go out with them. When relatives or friends of my parents called, they asked for him, too, and spoke to him and listened avidly to what he had to say.

In all the years that followed, Cathal and I never once spoke about our time in this new house with this new family. And my memory, usually so good, is not always clear. I cannot remember, for example, how we got to the house, who drove us there, or what this person said. I know that I was eight years old only because I remember what class I was in at school when I left and who the teacher was. It is possible that this period lasted just two or three months. Maybe it was more. It was not summer, I am sure of that, because Suzie, who remained unscathed by all of this (or so she said, when once, years ago, I asked her if she remembered it), was back at boarding school. I have no memory of cold weather in that house in which we were deposited, although I do think that the evenings were dark early. Maybe it was from September to December. Or the first months after Christmas. I am not sure.

What I remember clearly is the rooms themselves, the parlor and dining room almost never used and the kitchen, larger than ours at home, and the smell and taste of fried bread. I hated the hot thick slices, fresh from the pan, soaked in lard or dripping. I remember that our cousins were younger than we were and had to sleep during the day, or at least one of them did, and we had to be quiet for hours on end, even though we had nothing to do; we had none of our toys or books. I remember that nobody liked us, either of us, not even Cathal, who, before and after this event, was greatly loved by people who came across him.

We slept in my aunt's house and ate her food as best we could, and we must have played or done something, although we never went to school. Nobody did us any harm in that house; nobody came near us in the night, or hit either of us, or threatened us, or made us afraid. The time we were left by our mother in our aunt's house has no drama attached to it. It was all grayness, strangeness. Our aunt dealt with us in her own distracted way. Her husband was mild, distant, almost good-humored.

And all I know is that our mother did not get in touch with us once, not once, during this time. There was no letter or phone call or visit. Our father was in the hospital. We did not know how long we were going to be left there. In the years that followed, our mother never explained her absence, and we never asked her if she had ever wondered how we were, or how we felt, during those months.

This should be nothing, because it resembled nothing, just as one minus one resembles zero. It should be barely worth recounting to you as I walk the empty streets of this city in the desert so far away from where I belong. It feels as though Cathal and I had spent that time in the shadow world, as though we had been quietly lowered into the dark, everything familiar missing, and nothing we did or said could change this. Because no one gave any sign of hating us, it did not strike us that we were in a world where no one loved us, or that such a thing might matter. We did not complain. We were emptied of everything, and in the vacuum came something like silence—almost no sound at all, just some sad echoes and dim feelings.

I promise you that I will not call. I have called you enough, and woken you enough times, in the years when we were together and in the years since then. But there are nights now in this strange, flat, and forsaken place when those sad echoes and dim feelings come to me slightly louder than before. They are like whispers, or trapped whimpering sounds. And I wish that I had you here, and I wish that I had not called you all those other times when I did not need to as much as I do now.

My brother and I learned not to trust anyone. We learned then not to talk about things that mattered to us, and we stuck to this, as much as we could, with a sort of grim stubborn pride, all our lives, as though it were

a skill. But you know that, don't you? I do not need to call you to tell you that.

At J.F.K. that night, Frances Carey smiled warmly and asked me how bad things were. When I told her that my mother was dying, she said that she was shocked. She remembered my mother so well, she said. She said she was sorry. She explained that I could use the first-class lounge, making it clear, however, in the most pleasant way, that I would be crossing the Atlantic in coach, which was what I had paid for. If I needed her, she said, she could come up in a while and talk, but she had told the people in the lounge and on the plane that she knew me, and they would look after me.

As we spoke and she tagged my luggage and gave me my boarding pass, I guessed that I had not laid eyes on her for more than thirty years. But in her face I could see the person I had known, as well as traces of her mother and one of her brothers. In her presence—the reminder she offered of that house where Cathal and I had been left all those years ago—I could feel that this going home to my mother's bedside would not be simple, that some of our loves and attachments are elemental and beyond our choosing, and for that very reason they come spiced with pain and regret and need and hollowness and a feeling as close to anger as I will ever be able to manage.

Sometime during the night in that plane, as we crossed part of the Western Hemisphere, quietly and, I hope, unnoticed, I began to cry. I was back then in the simple world before I had seen Frances Carey, a world in which someone whose heartbeat had once been mine, and whose blood became my blood, and inside whose body I once lay curled, herself lay stricken in a hospital bed. The fear of losing her made me desperately sad. And then I tried to sleep. I pushed back my seat as the night wore on and kept my eyes averted from the movie being shown, whatever it was, and let the terrible business of what I was flying toward hit me.

I hired a car at the airport, and I drove across Dublin in the washed light of that early September morning. I drove through Drumcondra, Dorset Street, Mountjoy Square, Gardiner Street, and the streets across the river that led south, as though they were a skin that I had shed. I did not stop for two hours or more, until I reached the house, fearing that if I pulled up somewhere to have breakfast the numbness that the driving with no sleep had brought might lift.

Suzie was just out of bed when I arrived, and Jim was still asleep. Cathal had gone back to Dublin the night before, she said, but would be down later. She sighed and looked at me. The hospital had phoned, she went on, and things were worse. Your mother, she said, had a stroke during the night, on top of everything else. It was an old joke between us: never

“our mother” or “my mother” or “Mammy” or “Mummy,” but “your mother.”

The doctors did not know how bad the stroke had been, she said, and they were still ready to operate if they thought they could. But they needed to talk to us. It was a pity, she added, that our mother’s specialist, the man who looked after her heart, and whom she saw regularly and liked, was away. I realized then why Cathal had gone back to Dublin—he did not want to be a part of the conversation that we would have with the doctors. Two of us would be enough. He had told Suzie to tell me that whatever we decided would be fine with him.

Neither of us blamed him. He was the one who had become close to her. He was the one she loved most. Or maybe he was the only one she loved. In those years, anyway. Or maybe that is unfair. Maybe she loved us all, just as we loved her as she lay dying.

And I moved, in those days—that Tuesday morning to the Friday night when she died—from feeling at times a great remoteness from her to wanting fiercely, almost in the same moment, my mother back where she had always been, in witty command of her world, full of odd dreams and perspectives, difficult, ready for life. She loved, as I did, books and music and hot weather. As she grew older she had managed, with her friends and with us, a pure charm, a lightness of tone and touch. But I knew not to trust it, not to come close, and I never did. I managed, in

turn, to exude my own lightness and charm, but you know that, too. You don't need me to tell you that, either, do you?

I regretted nonetheless, as I sat by her bed or left so that others might see her—I regretted how far I had moved away from her, and how far away I had stayed. I regretted how much I had let those months apart from her in the limbo of my aunt's house, and the years afterward, as my father slowly died, eat away at my soul. I regretted how little she knew about me, as she, too, must have regretted that, although she never complained or mentioned it, except perhaps to Cathal, and he told no one anything. Maybe she regretted nothing. But nights are long in winter, when darkness comes down at four o'clock and people have time to think of everything.

Maybe that is why I am here now, away from Irish darkness, away from the long, deep winter that settles so menacingly on the place where I was born. I am away from the east wind. I am in a place where so much is empty because it was never full, where things are forgotten and swept away, if there ever were things. I am in a place where there is nothing. Flatness, a blue sky, a soft, unhaunted night. A place where no one walks. Maybe I am happier here than I would be anywhere else, and it is only the poisonous innocence of the moon tonight that has made me want to dial your number and see if you are awake.

As we drove to see my mother that morning, I could not ask Suzie a question that was on my mind. My mother had been sick for four days now and was lying there maybe frightened, and I wondered if she had reached out her hand to Cathal and if they had held hands in the hospital, if they had actually grown close enough for that. Or if she had made some gesture to Suzie. And if she might do the same to me. It was a stupid, selfish thing I wondered about, and, like everything else that came into my mind in those days, it allowed me to avoid the fact that there would be no time anymore for anything to be explained or said. We had used up all our time. And I wondered if that made any difference to my mother then, as she lay awake in the hospital those last few nights of her life: we had used up all our time.

She was in intensive care. We had to ring the bell and wait to be admitted. There was a hush over the place. We had discussed what I would say to her so as not to alarm her, how I would explain why I had come back. I told Suzie that I would simply say that I'd heard she was in the hospital and I'd had a few days free before classes began and had decided to come back to make sure that she was O.K.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked her.

She could not speak. Slowly and laboriously, she let us know that she was thirsty and they would not allow her to drink anything. She had a drip in her arm. We told the nurses that her mouth was dry, and they said

that there was nothing much we could do, except perhaps take tiny drops of cold water and put them on her lips using those special little sticks with cotton-wool tips that women use to put on eye makeup.

I sat by her bed and spent a while wetting her lips. I was at home with her now. I knew how much she hated physical discomfort; her appetite for this water was so overwhelming and so desperate that nothing else mattered.

And then word came that the doctors would see us. When we stood up and told her that we would be back, she hardly responded. We were ushered by a nurse with an English accent down some corridors to a room. There were two doctors there; the nurse stayed in the room. The doctor who seemed to be in charge, who said that he would have been the one to perform the operation, told us that he had just spoken to the anesthetist, who had insisted that my mother's heart would not survive an operation. The stroke did not really matter, he said, although it did not help.

"I could have a go," he said, and then immediately apologized for speaking like that. He corrected himself: "I could operate, but she would die on the operating table."

There was a blockage somewhere, he said. There was no blood getting to her kidneys and maybe elsewhere as well—the operation would tell us

for certain, but it would probably do nothing to solve the problem. It was her circulation, he said. The heart was simply not beating strongly enough to send blood into every part of her body.

He knew to leave silence then, and the other doctor did, too. The nurse looked at the floor.

“There’s nothing you can do then, is there?” I said.

“We can make her comfortable,” he replied.

“How long can she survive like this?” I asked.

“Not long,” he said.

“I mean, hours or days?”

“Days. Some days.”

“We can make her very comfortable,” the nurse said.

There was nothing more to say. Afterward, I wondered if we should have spoken to the anesthetist personally, or tried to contact our mother’s consultant, or asked that she be moved to a bigger hospital for another opinion. But I don’t think any of this would have made a difference. For years, we had been given warnings that this moment would come, as she fainted in public places and lost her balance and declined. It had been

clear that her heart was giving out, but not clear enough for me to have come to see her more than once or twice in the summer—and then when I did come I was protected from what might have been said, or not said, by the presence of Suzie and Jim and Cathal. Maybe I should have phoned a few times a week, or written her letters like a good son. But despite all the warning signals, or perhaps even because of them, I had kept my distance. And as soon as I entertained this thought, with all the regret that it carried, I imagined how coldly or nonchalantly a decision to spend the summer close by, seeing her often, might have been greeted by her, and how difficult and enervating for her, as much as for me, some of those visits or phone calls might have been. And how curtly efficient and brief her letters in reply to mine would have seemed.

And, as we walked back down to see her, the nurse coming with us, there was this double regret—the simple one that I had kept away, and the other one, much harder to fathom, that I had been given no choice, that she had never wanted me very much, and that she was not going to be able to rectify that in the few days that she had left in the world. She would be distracted by her own pain and discomfort, and by the great effort she was making to be dignified and calm. She was wonderful, as she always had been. I touched her hand a few times in case she might open it and seek my hand, but she never did this. She did not respond to being touched.

Some of her friends came. Cathal came and stayed with her. Suzie and I remained close by. On Friday morning, when the nurse asked me if I thought she was in distress, I said that I did. I knew that, if I insisted now, I could get her morphine and a private room. I did not consult the others; I knew that they would agree. I did not mention morphine to the nurse, but I knew that she was wise, and I saw by the way she looked at me as I spoke that she knew that I knew what morphine would do. It would ease my mother into sleep and ease her out of the world. Her breathing would come and go, shallow and deep, her pulse would become faint, her breathing would stop, and then come and go again.

It would come and go until, in that private room late in the evening, it seemed to stop altogether, as, horrified and helpless, we sat and watched her, then sat up straight as the breathing started again, but not for long. Not for long at all. It stopped one last time, and it stayed stopped. It did not start again.

She was gone. She lay still. We sat with her until a nurse came in and quietly checked her pulse and shook her head sadly and left the room.

We stayed with her for a while; then, when they asked us to leave, we touched her on the forehead one by one, and we left the room, closing the door. We walked down the corridor as though for the rest of our lives our own breathing would bear traces of the end of hers, of her final

struggle, as though our own way of being in the world had just been halved or quartered by what we had seen.

We buried her beside my father, who had been in the grave waiting for her for thirty-three years. And the next morning I flew back to New York, to my half-furnished apartment on Columbus and Ninetieth, and began my teaching a day later. I understood, just as you might tell me now—if you picked up the phone and found me on the other end of the line, silent at first and then saying that I needed to talk to you—you might tell me that I had over all the years postponed too much. As I settled down to sleep in that new bed in the dark city, I saw that it was too late now, too late for everything. I would not be given a second chance. In the hours when I woke, I have to tell you that this struck me almost with relief. ♦

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Colm Tóibín published his tenth novel, "The Magician," in 2021. His first poetry collection, "Vinegar Hill," is forthcoming this spring.